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# POLITICS



## ON CRISIS TRENDS IN THE LEGITIMACY OF THE POLITICAL REGIMES OF THE BALTIC STATES

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*This article considers the legitimacy of political regimes in the Baltic States by analysing three major parameters: confidence in political institutions, level of corruption, and the development of their party systems. The author identifies the major crisis trends in the legitimacy of the political regimes of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The article stresses the problem of legitimacy reproduction resulting from the limited representation of the national party systems. Special attention is paid to compensatory mechanisms used by political elites to 'artificially' reproduce legitimacy. It makes sense to analyse the deficit of legitimacy in the Baltic States not only in the context of threats to democratic institutions but also considering weaknesses of public institutions and insufficient resources to ensure stateness. This requires developing a hypothesis about smaller states 'importing' legitimacy from larger states and intergovernmental organisations, in whose zone of influence they are included. In other words, the EU and NATO can provide smaller states not only with economic and military resources but also legitimisation 'resources' using their prestige to support the belief of local residents that there is no alternative to the current political system of social organisation. Legitimacy deficit increases the risks of a rift between political elites in the Baltic States, which can become a prologue to a deep political crisis. In these conditions, compensatory mechanisms cannot be considered as targeted exclusively at broad social strata. They are also aimed at political elites, whose consolidation or 'encapsulation' is achieved by exaggerating external threats and resorting to repressive measures in an attempt to develop an ethnonational consensus. These methods are used to ensure self-preservation of the Baltic States political regimes within the current ideological and institutional configuration.*

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It has been ten years since the Baltic States' accession to the EU and NATO. Over the past decade, the foreign policy of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) has not become less confrontational, despite NATO's security guarantees and European integration. The discriminating 'alien' institution still exists in Latvia and Estonia alongside increasing efforts in the politics of memory and exploitation of the idea of the 'Russian threat'. Latvia and Lithuania have introduced criminal charges against the denial of 'Soviet occupation'. The Baltics' political elites strongly oppose negotiations with Russia on the implementation of the 'Eastern Partnership' programme.

Over the past decade, the Baltic political elites have met the challenge of formulating new positive goals of national development to replace the achieved 'return to the West' objective. Seeking a 'big idea' necessary for the Baltics' societies facing a difficult socioeconomic situation<sup>1</sup>, local authorities employ all available — political and ideological — tools, including theses about the 'liberation from the Soviet past' and 'Russian threat'<sup>2</sup>. The background to growing critical trends in the legitimacy of the Baltics' regimes is formed by increasingly explosive international situation.

S.M. Lipset stresses that legitimacy 'involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society' [24]. R. Collins expands this definition stressing that legitimacy is connected with not only the enthusiasm and obedience of masses but also the loyalty of political groups. Deligitimation is a result of the split between political elites doubting their legitimacy and the transition of masses from alienation to active opposition [11].

Legitimacy is not an absolute constant — it is a variable value<sup>3</sup>. The problem of empirical measurement of its level is widely debated in political science. Clear approaches to defining the empirical threshold of the legitimacy crisis have not been developed yet. The background of the crisis is the fact that a significant part of population is losing confidence in public institutions [9]. However, this definition requires further development and operationalization. A loss of confidence does not inevitably entail the toppling of existing power groups and the political regime in general.

A distinctive feature of the legitimacy crisis is that it may not manifest until a certain critical moment. It evolves gradually, sometimes unnoticed to even an acute observer. Observing the beginning of post-communist transformations in the 1990s, J. Pakulski stressed that Eastern Europe's communist regimes had lost their legitimacy almost immediately as protests had swept the countries at the turn of the 1990s [27]. However, this conclusion made during the rapid de-

<sup>1</sup> A useful indicator of the socioeconomic situation is demographic statistics. According to the recent census, Lithuania's population has decreased by 616,000 people (over 17%), Latvia's by 600,000 (over 22%), and Estonia's by 270,000 (over 17%) since 1989. For more detail, see [3].

<sup>2</sup> On the intensification of history of memories in Eastern Europe, see [4].

<sup>3</sup> H. Linz stresses, 'No regime is intrinsically legitimate: neither in terms of its command, nor forever, but probably very few are completely illegitimate and entirely based on coercion' [23; 66].

velopments was situational. The researcher overlooked the critical political processes and events taking place in Eastern Europe over several decades. The absence of revolutions and coups is not indicative of perfect legitimacy of the authorities. It would be a mistake to think that a regime is legitimate just because it is not openly challenged, stresses M. Dogan [15].

A political crisis resulting in a regime change or political system dysfunction is the climax of crisis trends, which are shaped by a number of smaller-scale conflicts and changes in the perception of the authorities by population and political groups. A legitimacy crisis can easily turn into an acute political crisis as the state loses its international prestige. A deep financial crisis arises and the socioeconomic sphere collapses following a split between the elites [11]. A combination of internal and external crisis factors aggravates the legitimacy crisis.

This article considers any crisis as a breaking point in the system development, when malfunctions make inertial motion impossible, thus bringing the system to a 'fork in the road'. It becomes either more simplified (tending towards destruction) or more complicated. This definition is very broad and it requires further development. However, it can be used for the identification of different stages of the crisis dynamics:

1) contradictions, accumulated in the course of a system's functioning turn into critical trends in the absence (or due to the weakness) of opposite trends towards the stabilisation of the system in its current form;

2) gradual deterioration of critical trends reaches the 'crisis' mark when the system cannot function as it did before;

3) overcoming the crisis requires destabilisation of the system, which in its turn, results in transformations — either simplification or complication of the system.

It makes sense to analyse the choice of variables/indicators that would make it possible to observe changes in the level of legitimacy and increasing critical trends until a full-scale political crisis arises. These variables are connected with the sources of legitimacy reproduction. The statement that, in modern society legitimacy is based on decisions made according to standard rules and procedures (traditions), has become a commonplace. However, procedures also require legitimisation by higher authorities<sup>4</sup> justified by the dominant ideology [6]. In the Baltics, the source of legitimacy is the ideology of liberal democracy strongly promoted by the Euro-Atlantic community and embodied in democratic institutions. Therefore, the first indicator of the level of legitimacy is confidence in central political institutions.

The second major source of legitimacy is effective functioning of political institutions in line with citizens' expectations. A crisis in legitimacy followed by a political crisis is a result of the process of institutionalisation lagging behind the society's increasing expectations [16]. Key indicators of the legitimacy level are incidence of corruption and the state of the party system,

<sup>4</sup> For instance, US citizens voice increasing discontent with the current functioning of political institutions, still expressing general confidence in the institutions themselves. For more detail, see [15].

including stability of major political parties. Functioning and support for party organisations affect the sustainability of the government's social base [7].

The problems of legitimacy of the Baltic political elites should be considered in the context of the studies of legitimacy in Eastern Europe. As a rule, Western political scientists consider a lack of legitimacy in view of risks to the liberal democratic model. Yet, the list of urgent issues is not exhausted by the viability of the democratic doctrine. Legitimacy is a necessary condition for the continued functioning of public institutions in general. It is worth stressing that the concept of 'post-communism' and the theory of transitology emerged as early as the previous decade [10]. In Western political science, the discussion of the 'communist legacy' has been superseded by the problems of institutional dysfunctioning of 'young democracies' in Eastern Europe [13].

The focus of research is shifting from the conditions for successful democratic transitions to the factors of their future stability. Francis Fukuyama questions the influential theory of consolidated democracy — the stage of development following successful transfer of power within two democratic electoral cycles — stressing the possibility of democratised regimes returning to authoritarianism [14]. T. Carothers argues that 'an uneasy, precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today in the developing and the post-communist world' [10].

This perspective stresses that definitions of democracy based on formal institutions and even successful transfer of power in a democratic election are not sufficient, since power can be 'intercepted' by informal institutions. As a result, democratic institutions and democratic principles can lose their decisive influence over decision processes; it can lead to the emergence of 'façade democracies'. Excessive attention paid by researchers to the formal rules<sup>5</sup> obscures the fact that the survival of unstable 'young democracies' depends on 'the ability of the underlying social groups to mobilize and to get their way' [14] when interacting with the power groups. Here, we return to the above-formulated thesis that a stable party system, answering the needs of the society, plays a central role in legitimacy reproduction.

Unsteady and weak connections between political parties and the society cannot ensure stable reproduction of legitimacy. It is particularly noticeable in the countries that recently underwent deep political transformations. As V.I. Kovalenko stresses, political elites coming to power in transitional political periods quickly lose the support of population when democratic transformations fail to solve urgent social problems [2]. The transition from 'transformation' to normal functioning requires the emergence of viable institutions. However, prerequisites for the formation of such institutions develop over long periods of the society's political evolution, shaped by its historical experience and political trajectories.

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<sup>5</sup> This asymmetry can be caused by complex procedures of analysing informal aspects of the political process. Such procedures suggest qualitative assessment and they are not always compatible with formalised argumentation.

Therefore, driving forces behind political transformations preceding their emergence are an important factor for assessing the stability of 'young' democratic institutions. Fukuyama distinguishes between 'conquered' and 'granted' democracies, stressing that despite short-term popular mobilisation during the 'velvet revolutions' in the countries of former communist bloc, 'the initial impetus still came from Gorbachev' [14]. This suggests that Eastern European democratic institutions are vulnerable, since the society is hardly capable of strengthening them and creating stable party systems. Therefore, external political and information/propaganda support for these institutions in individual countries is of special importance. In these conditions, one cannot ignore the voices of US experts emphasising the need for active promotion and *protection* of democracies in the world [21].

In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, experts from the Kennan Institute (US) declared the vulnerability of the Baltics' democratic institutions and stressed the need to involve national minorities into the political process<sup>6</sup>.

However, protection of democracy suggests the presence of its *enemies* — both external and internal ones, so-called 'fifth columns'. The democratic regime does not collapse, since there is no better alternative to democratic reforms, argue optimists [15]. Pessimists invoke numerous historical examples of declining legitimacy of democratic regimes caused not only by revolutions, military defeats, and political crises but also by small states losing political protection of empires [15].

With this in mind, let us analyse legitimacy in the context of the Baltic States using the key indicators of popular confidence in political institutions, incidence of corruption, and the state of the party system.

In 2001, 50% of Estonians, 51% of Latvians, and 59% of Lithuanians believed that public administration would benefit from returning to the communist regime or the establishment of a dictatorship [32]. In his study into Lithuania's political culture, the Lithuanian scholar M. Degutis proves the thesis about the absence of national conditions for a long-term stability of the democratic regime [12]. 'The survival of the democratic regime in the Baltic States should be related to the prospect of the EU membership', writes S. Spurga [35].

In view of the above data and sporadic political conflicts<sup>7</sup> in the Baltic States, the motto of 'returning to the West' was an important — and proba-

<sup>6</sup> Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute Matthew Rojansky proposed conducting an 'audit of vulnerabilities in the NATO members' own security establishments, politics and societies' in Eastern Europe. Showing understanding of concerns about 'Russian-backed fifth columns' (apparently, voiced by the Baltic, however, these countries are not explicitly mentioned), US experts believe that the countries of the region 'cannot turn a blind eye to nationalist strains in their domestic politics that demean or ignore the concerns of Russian-speaking minorities and Russia itself'. Therefore, it is proposed to increase the inclusiveness of political systems. For more detail, see [31].

<sup>7</sup> In 1993—2000, eight cabinets changed in Latvia [37]. According to A. Zaiganova, there was not a single case of an Estonian government serving the full four-year term in 1991—2007. In Lithuania, the 2004 EU accession coincided with a severe political crisis as R. Paksas was impeached on corruption charges [38].

bly decisive — factor behind the legitimacy of political regimes in the Baltics. After the accession to the EU and NATO, political scientists considered it an achievement that the Baltics had not followed the path of Moldavia and Yugoslavia [28].

In the past 3—5 years, sociological data have been inconclusive. However, the trends prevalent in the 1990s — early 2000s are still noticeable. Over 80 % of the Baltics' citizens believe that democracy is an adequate system of public administration. Nevertheless, 41 % of Lithuanians and 57 % of Latvians are convinced that a stronger leader defying the institutions of parliament and elections would be a better choice for the country. Moreover, 10 % of the respondents in Latvia and 6 % in Lithuania would prefer military dictatorship to democracy in their country [8]. This is accompanied by mass media's increasingly harsh rhetoric against Russia, which has its own repercussions. In Lithuania, 61.5 % considered Russia an enemy in 2005, and 72.5 % in 2014 [1]. A number of Lithuanian and Latvian researchers support the thesis about the 'vicious circle of political alienation', which provides fertile ground for populist parties causing the voters' disappointment in the political system [1].

Current sociological data on popular confidence in political institutions in the Baltics make it possible to describe the above trends in more detail. Confidence in the key political institutions — the parliament, government, and political parties — is well the EU average in Latvia and Lithuania and above it in Estonia (see table 1). However, in all the three Baltic States, the level of confidence in the EU is above the Union average.

It is worth mentioning that over the past 2—3 years, the level of confidence in political institutions has increased in the EU countries after the decline observed in 2008—2009 and associated with the economic crisis. However, the lack of confidence in political institutions is still rather noticeable in Lithuania and Latvia (table 1). Despite general low confidence in political institutions, citizens of the Baltics show a positive attitude towards the EU. In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the level of confidence in the EU is well above the Union average.

*Table 1*

**Level of distrust in political institutions**

	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia	EU average
Parliament	84 %	79 %	61 %	69 %
Government	74 %	75 %	58 %	72 %
Political parties	85 %	90 %	80 %	82 %
European Union	35 %	45 %	33 %	58 %

*Source:* [36].

In the Baltics, the key indicators of corruption incidence are above the EU average (table 2). Empirical studies suggest that Estonia has the lowest



corruption incidence in the Baltics. Estonia's anti-corruption practices set an example to other Eastern European countries [22]. However, Lithuania and Latvia are still among EU leaders in corruption.

In 2014, results of a survey on corruption in the EU countries were published [34]. The survey ranks Lithuania in the top five as to the proportion of respondents convinced that corruption is widespread in their country (95 %, surpassed only by Greece with 99 % and Italy with 97 %). Lithuania has the largest proportion of respondents across European countries who reported knowing someone who takes bribes (35 %). Here, Latvia ranks fourth with 25 %. Lithuania is also the EU leader in the number of respondents personally affected by corruption (25 %). Most often the question as to whether it is acceptable to offer an official a bribe in return for public services was answered positively by a significant number of respondents in Lithuania (42 % of the respondents), whereas Latvia ranked third (38 %). An important indicator is the perceived level of corruption in police and customs. Here, Lithuania and Latvia rank second (63 %) and third (58 %) respectively, being surpassed only by Romania (67 %).

Table 2

### Tolerance of EU citizens to corruption

	Tolerated, %	Inacceptable, %
Lithuania	62	29
Latvia	68	26
Estonia	38	59
EU average	33	64

Source: [34]

The above data describe the general level of corruption in the Baltics. As to politics, over the past years, corruption scandals have erupted more than once in all the three countries. A detailed analysis of such cases is beyond the scope of this work, therefore we will consider just a few of them.

In Lithuania, it is worth mentioning the scandal in the Homeland Union — Lithuanian Christian Democrats party over corruption in the Garbaravičius family — an influential Kaunas clan. A major scandal erupted over the actions of the mayor of Vilnius, A. Zuokos. The parliamentary and judicial investigation focused on a number of offences ranging from corruption in housing, utilities and real estate fraud to buying votes in the mayoral election. Court proceedings — despite the solid evidence — did not result in the mayor's resignation<sup>8</sup>. He left the office only after failing to win the election in 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Porkurory pytautysia pereyti Rubikom [Prosecution to cross the Rubicon] // *Express nedėlyja*. 2008. June, 27.



The then President of Latvia V. Zatlers initiated a referendum on the dissolution of the Parliament following a series of corruption-related scandals. However, the ‘oligarch case’ was not pursued any further. The focus on corruption caused the category of ‘oligarchs’ to become a key concept in Latvian political science. Oligarchs are often considered key actors in Latvian politics [8].

In 2013, a major scandal erupted in Estonia over vote rigging, which made it possible for ex-Foreign Minister and EP member K. Ojuland to enter the governing body of the Estonian Reform Party. Ojuland was expelled from the party but she retained her seat in the European Parliament<sup>9</sup>.

The above facts reflect the trends, which are also corroborated by a comprehensive empirical analysis of citizens’ perception of corruption in political institutions (table 3).

Table 3

**Corruption perception index by institution<sup>10</sup>**  
(1 — not corrupted, 5 — fully corrupted)

Country		Parties	Parliament	Army	NGOs	Mass media	Church	Business	Education	Judicial system	Medicine, healthcare	Police	Public officials
Estonia	2013	3.7	3.1	2.0	2.4	2.6	2.1	3.3	2.3	2.8	2.7	2.6	3.2
	2004	3.5	3.1	2.0	2.8	2.8	1.7	3.1	2.4	3.1	2.7	2.9	n/a
Latvia	2013	4.0	3.7	2.3	2.4	3.0	2.1	3.4	2.5	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.8
	2004	4.2	4.0	2.5	2.4	3.1	2.0	3.7	3.0	4.1	3.6	4.0	n/a
Lithuania	2013	4.2	4.3	2.4	2.6	3.3	2.5	3.6	3.2	4.3	4.1	3.9	3.9
	2004	4.2	4.2	2.4	2.8	3.2	2.3	3.5	3.0	4.2	3.8	4.1	n/a
Finland	2013	3.4	2.9	1.9	2.4	3.1	2.3	3.3	2.1	2.0	2.4	1.8	2.8
	2004	3.0	2.6	1.6	2.0	2.9	2.3	2.7	1.6	2.0	1.9	1.7	n/a

These data on confidence in political institutions and level of corruption are indicative of the persistent vulnerability of political regimes in the Baltics. In a number of major indices, the Baltic States rank well below the EU average and sometimes below many Eastern European countries.

<sup>9</sup> Korruptsiya i poddelka golosov: bolshe vsego kandidatov s tyomym proshlym v Lääne-Virumaa [Corruption and vote rigging: most candidates with murky past in Lääne-Virumaa] // Delfi. ee. 2015. January, 13.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Global Corruption Barometer by Transparency International, 2004—2013. For comparison, the table also contains data of a survey carried out in Finland. For more detail, see [17].

State-building requires not only free elections and declarations of commitment from the political class but also the basic resources of society. A high level of corruption — an indicator of instability in the state — is not always the main cause of a legitimacy crisis and political risks. ‘Rather, the problem is one of insufficient human and material resources’, Francis Fukuyama stresses. ‘Where the democratic opening (i. e. transparency and accountability. — *V. S.*) preceded state reform, the result has often been widespread clientelism’ [16].

Corruption and deficit of legitimacy are widespread problems at the current stage of political development not only in young and fragile states, but also in stronger ones. The central issue is the presence of counterweights that could balance the negative trends. These are political institutions capable of triggering political activity and voicing interests of citizens thus cementing the political community. In modern communities, political parties perform this key function.

The actions of political agents can be institutionalised by different organisations. However, in democratic societies, there is no viable alternative to political parties. Recently, discussions have focused on the possibility of social movements and situational political associations replacing popular parties. However, such structures are not capable of solving major organisational problems of campaigning and voter mobilisation to ensure a stable election process. Nor can these problems be solved by trade unions and business associations. Therefore, in case of a party system dysfunction, informal institutions — cliques and *clientele*, as well as criminal organisations which contribute to the criminalisation of governmental bodies — come to the fore. Some symptoms of these processes observed in the Baltics were examined above. Hence, a party system is a major mechanism ensuring interaction between society and ruling elites, capable of sustaining legitimacy through effective feedback.

The party systems of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have both similarities and differences. In all the three countries, the party systems are characterised by weak links between voters and parties and a high degree of fragmentation<sup>11</sup>. In Estonia, the 2000s witnessed a reduction in the party system fragmentation and relative stabilisation of electoral preferences. However, the 2015 parliamentary election was marked by increasing fragmentation as compared to the 2011 electoral cycle — six parties won seats in the parliament compared to four in 2011<sup>12</sup>. It is worth stress-

<sup>11</sup> This assessment is based on an analysis of voter turnout, popular confidence in parties and party membership, and stability of voters’ preferences. The party systems of Lithuania and Latvia are well below not only the Western European, but also EU average, whereas the situation in Estonia is slightly better. For more detail, see [33].

<sup>12</sup> The 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Estonia. Rewarding the Squirrels. Baltic worlds. March 9, 2015. [e-resource]. URL: <http://balticworlds.com/rewarding-the-squirrels/> (accessed on 25.03.2015).

ing that a number of Baltic scholars, while emphasising, a high fragmentation degree, weak institutional development and ‘commercialisation’ of the Baltic party system, stress the related risks of increased susceptibility to Russian influence<sup>13</sup>.

A feature common to all the Baltic States is party split over attitudes to the communist past. Political parties opposing the doctrine of ‘Soviet occupation’ are automatically labelled as ‘communist’<sup>14</sup> or ‘pro-Russian’ parties. In the Baltics, party struggle is often based on ‘antagonising Russia’ [20] aimed not only at marginalising opponents, but also at justifying their own political decisions.

The party systems of Latvia and Estonia are split along ethnic lines. As a result, opposition parties representing a significant proportion of voters, including the Russian-speaking minority, are not allowed to join the ruling coalition or government. V. Pettai calls this phenomenon ‘ostracism’ [29]. J. Rozenvalds describes this situation as ‘encapsulation’ of ruling elites [5].

In Lithuania, the ethnic split is less pronounced and the divide runs along the lines of left/right wing pattern (which is rather strained in Lithuania) as well as the attitudes to the Soviet past, Russia and, partly, to the Polish minority. One can argue that the Ukraine crisis has had a strong consolidating effect on a negative foundation. Today, Lithuania’s major political parties (conservatives and social democrats) — who used to be considered system-building opponents, proposed different agendas, including views on Russia — have become a monolith as to a wide range of foreign policy issues.

In Latvia, the ruling coalition employs the ideology of ethnic nationalism. To compete with the ‘Harmony’ party, which is supported by the Russian-speaking population, the ruling coalition uses not only its own party organisations but also combinations of formal and informal mechanisms beyond the party system. The ‘Harmony’ party (earlier, the

<sup>13</sup> For more detail, see [18]. It is worth noting that these problems are discussed by both researchers and high-ranking politicians. In 2015, Andris Bērziņš, President of Latvia, said, ‘our party system cannot be called strong. It is being developed. The party system is not deeply rooted in the civil society, thus most citizens are right to think that the parties do not represent the interests of the society’ (President: The era of Latvian parties is just too short // *Latvijas Sabiedriskie mediji*. 2015. February 23).

<sup>14</sup> In effect, the party struggle is increasingly focused on attitudes towards Russia, whereas the adjective ‘pro-Russian’ is considered derogatory. Yet, the notion of ‘communism’ still plays the role of an important marker, a division line between different political forces in Lithuania. Communism is legally equated to Nazism. Whereas an open declaration of Communist views can lead to legal prosecution, anti-communist statements have become a widespread populist technique. The division into ‘post-communists’ (represented by the Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania and later by the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania) and ‘anti-communists’ (primarily, the Homeland Union as a successor to Sajudis) is employed in the works of a number of Lithuanian researchers. For more detail, see [30].

Harmony Centre) having won the 2011 and 2014 parliamentary elections did not gain the right to form the ruling coalition. This makes it possible for several right conservative parties to create a coalition and exclude the 'Harmony' with its alternative left-centre agenda from forming the government. In 2011, leaders of conservative parties demanded that the Harmony Centre acknowledge 'Soviet occupation' and recognise Latvian as the only official language in order to be given access to the ruling coalition [8]. This requirement has not been waived. Latvia's ruling nationalist parties demand that the social democratic 'Harmony' accept their 'red lines' (acknowledgement of 'occupation', etc.) to 'freeze' the domestic political conflict and isolate the competitor that enjoys strong support from voters.

A similar situation has developed in Estonia. The Estonian Centre Party is left out of the governing coalition despite coming second in the 2011 (23.3 %) and the 2015 (24.8 %)<sup>15</sup> elections, following closely the Estonian Reform party. However, unlike the 'Harmony' in Latvia, the party has control over the capital's municipality.

An analysis of the above data makes it possible to speak of a significant deficit of legitimacy characteristic of the Baltics' political regimes. A lack of legitimacy and low confidence in political institutions accompanied by high incidence of corruption and strong informal institutions increase risks of political destabilisation. The weakness of party systems and political institutions, discrimination of national minorities limit opportunities for the political system's self-regulation in terms of legitimacy. Political elites are faced with the challenge of creating *compensatory* mechanisms that could reverse the negative trends of declining legitimacy.

In this situation, priority is given to the justification of Latvian and Estonian discriminatory institutions of popular non-citizenship limiting the political and economic rights of national minorities. This priority is closely connected with the need to convey legitimacy upon the political groups brought to power by social movements — the Baltics' 'popular fronts'. These organisations were protest movements creating 'parallel government bodies', which required a solid ideological basis for them to secure positions in power.

Ethnic nationalism became the major programme and ideological basis for the new political elites. The declared doctrine of continuity of states and popularisation of the 'Soviet occupation' ideologeme were used to strengthen the legitimacy of the ethnocratic model of democracy in the Baltics. Integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures under the 'return to Europe' motto played the role of a 'positive' political programme.

<sup>15</sup> According to the Election Commission of Estonia ("Upcoming elections in Estonia: 2015 Elections to the Riigikogu". [E-resource]. URL: <http://vvk.ee/general-info/> (accessed on 25.03.2015).

In this context, the ‘securitisation’ discourse gained wide currency. Arguments focused on defence against the ‘Russian threat’ were used to win support for accession to the EU and NATO and to secure a stronger position in negotiations with Western elites. This resulted in the concept of the Baltics being an ‘outpost’ of the West at the border with the ‘Eastern neighbour’. This topic is still much talked in the Baltics’ mass media.

Another compensatory mechanism is institutionalisation of the politics of memory. A number of museums, research centres, and official commissions dealing with ‘Soviet occupation’ and ‘victims of two totalitarian systems’ — which is often reduced to equating Communism with Nazism with an emphasis on the ‘historical guilt’ of the former — have been established in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia under the governments’ aegis. These efforts might have contributed to the justification of ethnic nationalism and ‘securitisation’. However, over time, the politics of memory has developed its own logic under the influence of persistent and often successful attempts of the Baltic elites to contribute to the European politics of memory and export domestic practices to other region (for instance, Ukraine). In the Baltics’ domestic policy, consistent development of historical topics had to compensate for the ‘deficient’ history of sovereign statehood. As a result, the topic of ‘Soviet occupation’ became somewhat of a marker for elite groups drawing a line between the supporters of the ruling regimes and the ‘others’, thus contributing to the consolidation of the ruling elite based on ethnic nationalism.

However, these compensatory mechanisms have certain limitations. Administrative tools and public support shaped the direction of the politics of memory and ideological activities and stimulated them. However, they faced a serious problem of producing viable content<sup>16</sup>. The situation in the Baltics proves J. Habermas’s thesis that ‘there can be no administrative creation of meaning’ [6]. The inefficiency of the politics of memory is manifested in the ‘criminalisation’ of denial of ‘Soviet

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<sup>16</sup> Primarily, this concerns the short history of the Baltics’ sovereignty, the problem of dealing with numerous facts of collaborationism with the Nazi regime. As a result, special attention is paid to emphasising the external threat coming from the others (the ‘Eastern neighbour’). The Norwegian scholar Øyvind Jæger describes the situation in the Baltics as follows: ‘...the invoking of historical memory as legitimisation of state-building enterprises reproduces the perception of threat and perpetuates the discourse of danger. A rationale for widespread securitisation is provided, and a precarious Baltic state identity is (re)produced. Precisely because identity is precarious and elusive and because state institutions are weak, faltering or lacking, the entire state project is perceived as vulnerable. The discourse of danger is instrumental in propping up state institutions, borders and identity to mitigate the sense of vulnerability’ [19]. A similar assessment of the situation in Lithuania against the background of the recent international developments is given by the Lithuanian historian Algimantas Kasparavičius. He stresses that ‘a search for enemies does not suggest political and cultural maturity of the state and society’ (Historian: Lithuanians stimulate information war themselves // Delfi. lt. 2014. June 2).

occupation'. Relevant laws imposing criminal responsibility on individuals denying 'Soviet occupation' were adopted in Lithuania and Latvia in 2010 and 2014 respectively.

These innovations are widely discussed. Yet, they are not the only measures that can be called repressive compensatory mechanisms. Traditionally, their implementation has been the realm of the Baltics' law enforcement and special services. The 'securitisation discourse' inevitably suggests strong presence of special services in the country's public sphere. A detailed analysis of this topic is beyond the scope of this study. Here, we will analyse only several examples describing the whole picture. Estonia's Internal Security Service (KaPo) regularly publishes reports listing so-called 'public enemies'<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, KaPo organises workshops for social science teachers<sup>18</sup>. In Lithuania, special services use similar methods (public reports by the State Security Department focused primarily on the 'threat from the East' are actively promoted in mass media), but they do it more ostentatiously. Similar reports listing 'disloyal individuals' in political circles, mass media, and human rights organisations are published by Lithuanian special services — the Constitution Protection Bureau and Security Police. In 2014, Lithuania's law enforcement structures conducted searches in Russian schools of Vilnius prompted by their students' trips to Russian summer camps<sup>19</sup>. In 2015, public attention was drawn to the police searching the flats of famous Lithuanian journalists, artists, and scholars suspected of 'disseminating anti-Lithuanian information'.

Based on this analysis, one can draw certain conclusions as to the legitimacy of the Baltics' political regimes and the prospects of their development. Deficit of legitimacy of the Baltics' political regimes becomes evident when analysing certain empirical indices — primarily, low confidence in political institutions and high incidence of corruption. This situation is characteristic of Eastern Europe in general. However, the Baltic States show a

<sup>17</sup> In 2012, Vice Mayor of Tallinn Mihhail Kõlvart got on the list of 'public enemies' ('Kõlvart: I will not put up with my name mentioned by KaPo and the motion of censure') // Delfi. ee. 2012. April 18). The 2011—2012 public report of the Estonian Internal Security Service accused member of the Estonian Parliament Yana Toom of anti-state activity manifested in support for education in the Russian language. In 2014, the appeal court ruled in favour of Yana Toom. The Internal Security Services had to issue a public refutation of the allegations against the politician. However, the Court did not rule for psychological damage compensation and the withdrawal of published reports. (Arguments used in court to secure the victory of Toom over the Internal Security Services // Delfi. ee. 2014. October 27). At the end of 2010, just before the parliamentary election, the KaPo published a report containing unfounded allegations about the chair of the Estonian Centre Party Edgar Savisaar receiving money from Russian businesspeople for the election campaign (KaPo publishes report on Savisaar financed from Russia // Delfi. ee. 2010. December 21).

<sup>18</sup> 'KaPo to instruct teachers in a top-secret atmosphere' // Delfi. ee. 2015. March 19.

<sup>19</sup> Two Russian schools searcher in Vilnius // Delfi. lt. 2014. December 3.

number of specific features. The problem of low confidence in political institution is especially acute in Lithuania and Latvia. A high degree of fragmentation and weak support for party systems observed in the Baltics complicates the reproduction of legitimacy in a way traditional for democratic societies. The discriminatory institutions of 'non-citizenship' existing in Lithuania and Estonia aggravate the problem of legitimacy regulation preventing large social groups from participating in political processes and voicing their interest. The political systems of these states are neither balanced nor stable, whereas the election mechanisms do not ensure real representation. In total, these phenomena make it possible to speak of increasing trends towards a deeper crisis in the legitimacy of the Baltic regimes fraught with 'borrowing' legitimacy through exploiting the resource of external threat and leading to political destabilisation. The only obstacle to the negative trends is high popular confidence in the EU institutions.

Deficit of legitimacy results in a wider use of coercion by the political regime [15]. Conceptualising this dependence makes it possible to distinguish between 'despotic and 'infrastructural' types of power [25]. Infrastructural power does not resort to coercion ensuring effective public participation in the life of the society through popular confidence in the authorities acting in the interests of the society [26]. The weakness of institutional mechanisms of legitimacy reproduction requires active participation of power groups through administrative methods and 'artificial' consolidation of social groups and political elites in the framework of existing regimes. This trend is manifested in a wider use of compensatory mechanisms by the Baltics' political elites — developing the image of a 'victim nation' by means of the politics of memory and images of 'Russian threat' and 'a besieged fortress'. These efforts are justified by a combination of ethnic nationalism and the democratic discourse, cemented by formal institutions and supported through active and open participation of law enforcement agencies and special services in social and political processes.

It makes sense to analyse the problem of legitimacy in the Baltics not only from the perspective of threats to democratic institutions, but also in the context of weakness of public institutions and a lack of resources for ensuring statehood<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, there is a need to examine the hypothesis of small countries 'importing' legitimacy resources from large states and intergovernmental associations, in whose zone of influence they are located. In other words, the EU and NATO can provide small states with economic and military resources, as well as with those of legitimation thus supporting the popular conviction that there is no alternative to the current political system.

The deficit of legitimacy increases the risk of a split in the Baltics' political elites. It can be a prologue to a deep political crisis. In these

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<sup>20</sup> F. Fukuyama describes this problem as follows: 'There are, however, many neopatrimonial states that pretend to be modern polities, but these in fact constitute rent-sharing kleptocracies run for the private benefit of the insiders' [16].



conditions, compensatory mechanisms can be considered as aimed at broad social groups. They are also applied to political elites, whose consolidation/‘encapsulation’ is achieved through exploiting the topic of external threat and resorting to repressive measures aimed to create the ethnic national ‘consensus’ of elites. These methods are used to preserve the current ideological and institutional configuration of the Baltic political regimes.

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